

THE SON OF HIS MOTHER

By HENRY NORMANBY.

A very dramatic and powerfully written story, in Henry Normanby's best vein, throwing into strong relief the most sublime of all human sentiments—the enduring and all-pardoning affection of a mother for her erring child.



HE old woman was crouching over the remains of the fire, the few smouldering ashes of which she had raked together to conserve their redness, and spreading the palms of her yellow, wrinkled hands to get the little warmth that remained. She was very old and very worn ; her face was deeply channelled with the lines of hardship, privation, and sorrow, and about it her unwashed grey hair hung in thin lank wisps ; her wrists and knuckles were swollen and distorted with rheumatism ; her feet, which were encased in a pair of man's boots, were misshapen and almost useless ; from her under-jaw, which moved continually like that of some ruminating animal, projected obliquely her only remaining tooth ; her eyes were deeply sunken, and over them her heavy, grey eyebrows joined to form a scraggy arch. Her thin shoulders were covered with a piece of old sacking, which fulfilled the office of mantle, and she drew its ends together over her flat bosom with one hand while she held the other close to the dying fire. She would have been brutal but for the " tone of time " which softened the grey asperity of her face and made it almost beautiful.

The squalor and dreariness of the room wherein the old woman sat was accentuated by the feeble light of a primitive oil-lamp, which, having no chimney, was in constant danger of being blown out by the currents of air which came in through innumerable crevices, made evident otherwise by the obviously futile attempts to stop them. Over the door was hung another piece of sacking, not yet sufficiently tattered to be utilised as clothing.

The furniture consisted of a small deal table, an old oak chest standing in a corner near the fireplace, a decrepit armchair stuffed with horsehair and become easy by reason of much use, some crockery on the mantelpiece made up of mutilated shepherds, an ultra-faithful dog, and sundry strange creatures either extinct or not yet reached by evolution. Hanging from a nail in the wall was a rudely fashioned wooden sword, evidently the sometime possession of a martially disposed child. The walls themselves were covered with a blue distemper and were decorated with almanacks lacking frames, some Scriptural texts, and the representation of a multi-

coloured Joseph seeking safety in flight. On the table lay a handleless knife, a broken basin of cold potatoes, half an onion, and a crust of stale bread. Altogether it was the interior of a poverty-stricken hovel, which would have been but an indifferent dwelling-place for a dog.

For just over thirty years had the old woman lived in this place ; here were her nuptials celebrated ; here had her son been born ; her husband had gone hence on his great journey ; and she, hapless mortal, was here living out the remainder of her slow, inconsequent days. Loneliness and misery had dried up the milk of human kindness and hardened her soul. Neighbours she had none, for the cottage stood alone on a barren, wind-swept hill, shunned by the peasants of the district and forsaken even by the sheep for its dreary and inhospitable aspect.

Many years before, during one of the rebellions which were constantly breaking out in that faction-ridden land, her only son, always a rascal, had enlisted under the Royal banner in order to escape being hanged for murder. Three times had he returned home, always drunk and always to demand money ; thrice only in nearly thirty years had the old woman set eyes on her son, and each time she had suffered robbery and insult at his hands.

Let it be truly told of her, poor, weary old woman, that she remembered not his transgressions, neither hardened her heart against him. Every hour that came with the oppression of its presence brought also with it some gracious thought of the child who had lain his head on her bosom and, secure in her arms, slept sweetly through the perils of infancy.

Over the fire she crouched, this old, worn woman, stretching her palsied hands to the dying embers, waiting and waiting for the return of her son.

At twelve o'clock, like a thief in the night, he came home—came in from the sweet serenity of the cool night air and stood ignobly in the presence of his mother. At the lifting of the latch she rose, still holding with one hand the ends of the sack, the other stretched forward in intense expectation. Seeing the one beloved object of her dreams she stood quite still, speechless and trembling with joy.

Without a word or any greeting whatever the son walked in and stood gazing about the room ; then he sat down in the only chair and demanded food ; he demanded it coarsely, as a brutal man demands a right, and when his mother set before him the only food that was there he foully cursed it and her. Nevertheless, he ate every particle, not asking if she were hungry.

Having finished his meal, he lit his pipe and proceeded to examine the contents of the room, the old woman watching him with apprehensive eyes. The oak box arrested his attention, and he went over to it and raised the lid.

"There's nothing there, dearie," said the mother ; "nothing at all but a few bits of things for myself."

He made no answer, but proceeded to pull out a web of coarse linen. At the sight of it she instantly became combative.

"Let that be ; it's mine."

The son turned a sullen look at her over his shoulder.

"There's good stuff here," he said.

"And there to stop. Come away ; 'tis mine."

"'Tis good stuff—too good to stop here," he went on. "I can sell it."

With ruthless hands he dragged out the linen, so that it fell in untidy folds across the floor.

"Let it be, you dog !" the woman shrieked madly, trying to open his hands and tear the linen from him. "Oh, the thief that he is—the thief !"

As they struggled together the box was shaken and something fell from the linen to the bottom.

"That's money !" exclaimed the son, and he threw the white web on the ground and searched in the box, finding two coins covered with white linen, oversewn at the edges and worked with a cross.

"What's here ?" he asked. "What's in them ?"

"The pennies for my eyes," answered the woman with a bitter wail in her voice, and, holding the crumpled linen to her straight bosom, she went on :

"It's my shroud, my clean, decent shroud."

"The living want no grave-clothes," said the son. "I must have money ; I've deserted, and they'll shoot me if I'm caught."

"Mother of Jesus ! You'll not sell it ?" she implored.

"I'll sell it," he answered, as he bit at the stitches on one of the linen-covered pennies and tore off the cover with his teeth.

Then, all at once, she saw him as he was. Truth held up her lamp and revealed him, hideous and detestable. For the first time the mother saw her son in all his foulness and brutality ; her eyes pierced into the depths of his base soul and searched vainly for a single sweet atom. The revelation was swift and terrible, but Truth at last stood between them and parted them for ever.

As he put the pennies in his pocket and threw the white covers away the old woman cursed the son she bore. Standing there with her shroud falling about her she cursed every hair of his head, she cursed his eyes and his hands, his wicked heart, and every drop of blood in his body.

Once he attempted to speak, but the swift torrent of her vituperation swept away and drowned his less strenuous railing ; and when at last the vocabulary of her abuse was exhausted she turned from him and went slowly upstairs to her bed.

Some hours later, when the crests of the mountains were glowing red above the clinging mists of the morning, an old woman, with bonnet drawn over her face and with a piece of sacking fastened round her shoulders in lieu of a shawl, crept quietly out of the cottage and made her way down the bleak and dew-drenched hill. Never once turning her head in the direction of the home she was leaving, she hurried away and was soon lost to sight in the grey murk of dawn.

Almost as soon as the lonely figure had disappeared a small body of infantry emerged from the coppice at the foot of the hill and stole silently

up to the cottage. They were weary with long marching and covered with the mire of the roads ; each man carried a musket, and at their head marched a sergeant, distinguished by his red cotton sash, the stripes on his arm being obliterated by mud. There was a dogged determination in his face and in the heart of everyone of them marched murder ; while he, whose life they sought and meant to have, dreamed idly of sale and barter, profit and loss, of clean linen and gold and silver, of feasting and rioting and drinking without end.

On reaching the house the sergeant called a halt, and the butts of the muskets struck the ground with a soft thud. He himself went forward and demanded admittance in the name of the King, emphasising his demand with an assault upon the door. There was no response, and the sergeant's white-gloved hand rattled the loose latch. Once more he asked admittance in the Royal name, and struck at the evidently barricaded door with the butt of a musket. The soft wood broke and splintered, but the door remained fast ; whereupon the sergeant returned to his men and stationed them round the house.

Morning came in on the world with radiant step and the dark vapours of night melted and disappeared in the golden glow of the sun. High in the palpitating blue a lark was singing and from the undulating mists of the valley could be heard the deep lowing of drowsy cattle. Borne on the faintly moving air came the call to Matins from the distant church of Kilspal.

The priest, on his way thither, met an old woman carrying a web of white linen folded in a bundle. She asked for no blessing, but hurried on despite her rheumatism. He wondered what business she could be about at so strange an hour.

Outside the cottage the men stood idly, waiting for orders. Not a sound came from the house itself. The pear-trees, leaning weakly over the palings, tall, barren growths, uncultured and unpruned, stirred slightly in the warm gusts of air. The straight rushes stood aggressively out of the soaking ground and a solitary toad crept out from beneath a lump of clay to search for its morning meal. Peace lay over the land and the earth was very fair and sweet to look upon.

After resting a space and refreshing themselves with bread and potheen, the sergeant ordered his men to close in on the house while two of them broke down the door. They were instructed to take the fugitive alive if possible ; " but," he added grimly, " take him."

" There he is, bad cess to him !" cried one of the men, and every murderous eye followed the direction of his outstretched hand. Peering through the dim panes of the upper window could be seen the deserter, still dressed in his uniform and wearing his red forage-cap.

" The Saints be praised," said the sergeant ; " a crown piece to the man who brings him to me fit for hanging. Boys, you've all heard of Kitty McCray—she was my sister. Break in the door."

It yielded easily, and the sergeant and two men entered the room where but a few hours before the old woman had crouched over the dying fire. On the floor was an empty oaken chest and two circular bits of

linen, torn at the edges and worked with a cross. A smell of stale, rank tobacco smoke permeated the heavy air.

The door leading to the upper rooms was fastened, but a vigorous pull dragged it open, and the implacable sergeant and his men noisily ascended the stairs. There were two rooms at the top, one open and entirely empty, the other closed and barricaded. To this closed door the men turned and called upon the prisoner to open it. No answer being given, they promptly demolished it, and the sergeant stood face to face with the man he meant to kill.

He had retreated to a corner of the room, across which he had dragged a bedstead and had piled upon it an old chest of drawers. Behind this ineffective barricade stood the deserter, his forage-cap pulled over his eyes and his face almost completely hidden in an old scarf which was wound several times round his neck.

In each hand he grasped a horse-pistol, which he levelled at the heads of his would-be captors.

The men, being more desirous of murdering than of being murdered, drew back a pace or two; but the sergeant stepped forward and called upon him to surrender.

"Patrick Phelan," said he, "further resistance is useless. You know me; we have met before. Now, listen—lay down your arms and surrender, or, when I say three, we fire."

The deserter spoke no word, but crouched behind his foolish barricade, still holding out his pistols.

"One!"

A third of his life had gone in a moment, but he gave no sign.

"Two!"

Two-thirds of his life, and still he neither moved nor spoke.

"Three!"

When the smoke cleared, the men went forward and dragged away the chest of drawers. Lying across the bed was a still and silent figure, in each hand an empty and useless horse-pistol.

The sergeant lifted up the body by the shoulders; the head dropped limply to one side and the forage-cap slipped off, disclosing a tangle of thin grey hair, which fell in lank wisps about the unwashed and wrinkled face of an old, worn woman.

* * * * *

That night, in a shebeen three miles away, the implacable sergeant and his men came upon the deserter, drunk and dressed in the stolen clothing of his mother. Short shrift was his. They marched him back to the lonely cottage on the wind-swept hill, stripped him of his disguise, and, on a pear-tree in his own garden, incontinently hanged him.

Thereafter a wonderful thing happened. The pear-tree which had served for a gibbet became black as ingratitude, then presently withered and died. Later, over an obscure grave in a corner of Kilsal Churchyard, a rose-tree, fragrant and beautiful, grew and bloomed. It was covered thick with thorns, its petals were whiter than white linen, and in the centre of each one of them was the figure of a cross, blood-red.